

Michelle Harven: You're listening to Force for Hire, I'm Michelle Harven.

Desmon Farris: And I'm Desmon Farris, come with us as we take a deep dive into private military contracting and how it's transforming the battle field.

Speaker 3: There may be no federal contractor in America that has grown more rapidly than Blackwater over the last seven years. The question for this hearing is whether outsourcing to Blackwater is a good deal for the American taxpayer.

Desmon Farris: Welcome back. If you haven't listened to the first episode, it's an introduction to the series and goes a little into who we are, the history of the industry, and a little bit of how we got to where we are today

Michelle H.: And this episode, we'll dig into that last point even more. Yes. Today we'll be talking about Blackwater.

Desmon Farris: That controversial company that put private military contracting into the headlines and jump started a conversation on the industry itself.

Michelle H.: That's right. And a few times I told people about our idea for this podcast. Most of the time their response would be, oh, like Blackwater. It's many people's point of reference for this topic. And for that reason, I don't think many people realize that when Blackwater left the headlines, the industry kept going. So we wanted to address the elephant in the room and talk about Blackwater and its legacy and a straightforward but realistic way.

Desmon Farris: Hold on, but before we do that, let's talk about the company's beginnings. Blackwater USA. It was established in 1997 by Erik Prince, a former Navy SEAL officer and Al Clarke, a former Navy SEAL firearms instructor. They opened up a training facility in North Carolina and said the name came from the color of the swamp water that was on the land.

Michelle H.: Prince said he created Blackwater to offer the military and law enforcement expert instruction and world class training venues. And it wasn't until the Iraq war that the company really started getting work as security professionals. After 9/11 president George W. Bush created a CIA unit to take out al Qaeda operatives. Blackwater was hired to help run this program.

Desmon Farris: And as we talked about before, the number of contractors to military personnel during the height of the Iraq war was about one to one and contractors begin taking a more integral role in military operations.

Michelle H.: That's the part that really shifted during the Iraq war.

Deborah Avant: Deborah Avant and I'm a professor at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at University of Denver.

Michelle H.: You've been sort of researching this topic for a while. How long have you been sort of looking at the space?

Deborah Avant: So I started actually keeping track of something that became a focus on contractors in the late 1990s. I had done a lot of work on adaptation counterinsurgency, which put me in contact with a number of people that we're looking at, how the military was responding to peace missions and other kinds of things in the 90s. And what I noticed that some of the workshops and conferences, there were people from places like KBR and MPRI and I sort of started keeping a file on that and began really researching in earnest about 2000.

Michelle H.: And so you were kind of on track to see sort of the surge of what happened with the Iraq war and the contractors that went on there.

Deborah Avant: What shifted interact was the use of military contractors for these personal security details, site security and those kinds of things. And then there also was an explosion of contractors, which was partly due to the fact that many in Washington for sort of unreasonable reasons, really thought that the war in Iraq would be much easier than it was. And the fact that there had been this growth in the industry in the 1990s, there were a number of different companies that were sort of poised and Blackwater for instance, began as a training facility. But when the needs shifted in the Iraq war, when the war proved not to be as easy as people had expected, they could easily shift into providing different kinds of services. And the site security services proved to be an important way to substitute for the fact that you didn't have enough troops to secure the country.

Deborah Avant: And then as the Iraq war began and things were suddenly much more dangerous on the ground even though it looked like the US had won, it was not as easy to sort of sweep up and contractors provided the mechanism for sort of stabilizing a particular areas without sort of thinking about mobilizing more troops changing the war plans that were already in place.

Michelle H.: They are making any sort of unpopular decisions.

Deborah Avant: Right. And that was when you think of the surge that went into Iraq, a little bit later. And the difficulties that that provided politically to the administration imagine what would have happened in 2004 had they asked for essentially an additional hundred thousand troops. I mean that was unfeasible. And yet that's probably about how many contractors went in. We're actually not sure of the numbers exactly, but that's our best estimate.

Michelle H.: Right. And so Blackwater started as this sort of training facility. How did they become the sort of company that we know so well?

Deborah Avant: Well. So part of it was that they were doing training for US forces. So in doing that kind of training, they got to know people. And of course Eric Prince had had

a background, he was a navy seal, had retired. He had just like a lot of the companies, Blackwater was built around a network of people that he knew and they all had their own networks. And so that was part of it. And of course he had a lot of money to invest in his training facility. So it was a very elaborate facility that did a lot of training for the US before the Iraq war.

Desmon Farris: A significant moment during the Iraq war was the horrific attack on four Blackwater security contractors in Fallujah. On March 31st, 2004 close to a year since the start of the Iraq invasion four Blackwater employees were killed by a group of insurgents. Their bodies were burned and hung from a bridge, a moment that shocked and angered the US public and triggered a massive military campaign to retake control of the city. And it was this incident that first brought Blackwater to the public eye.

Michelle H.: So 2004 was the Fallujah ambush. Is this something that the contracting sort of industry reacted to as contractors needed to be more careful or was this just sort of what they saw an attack on American force?

Deborah Avant: So even before 2004, it was pretty clear that what was happening with contractors in Iraq was different than what had happened in the 1990s. This was a much less permissive environment as people put it at the time. And I think the Fallujah incident just really demonstrated that. And I think many people in the contracting community felt that before. And actually many people in the military felt that before that things were kind of getting out of hand. But the incident was so dramatic. And it led to a lot of publicity and a lot of questions about what exactly contractors were doing in Iraq.

Deborah Avant: And that was probably the moment when people in Congress began to kind of look up and say what's going on. And in fact Ike Skelton wrote a letter to Donald Rumsfeld, basically ask him what's going on. And on that kind of congressional inquiry actually was hugely important for what we know contracting now, because they required every appropriations bill that occurred between 2004 and probably 2011 had additional congressional questions and requirements that led to a much greater capacity to keep track of and understand what contractors were doing, particularly in contingency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Michelle H.: Another pivotal moment in the Iraq war also involved Blackwater employees. On September 16th, 2007, Blackwater guards were escorting a US embassy convoy through Baghdad's Nisour Square. At one point in the crowded traffic circle, the guards opened fire killing 17 Iraqi civilians and injuring 20 more. The adventure international protest sparked several investigations, one by the FBI and became a low point in the war. Blackwater is licensed to operate in Iraq, was temporarily revoked. The company put out a statement that the guards were acting defensively, but the Iraqi government concluded the shootings were unprovoked. A lot of people point to a near Nisour Square shooting to sort of symbolize contractors at American force in the Iraq war. What did this mean for contractors?

Deborah Avant: So I think the biggest thing about Nisour Square is it made public what people were really worried about. That sort of began a little bit in 2004 and basically celebrated, which was there was ... The war in Iraq, as I suggested before, was a little bit unexpected. The degree to which it was this an permissive environment. As the insurgency escalated there was even a resistance to call it an insurgency. But it was clearly a much more difficult and problematic environment. And in that environment, there were a variety of different responses by different contracting companies. Some of them had clients all over the world and really wanted to ensure that they didn't do anything that would be viewed as problematic from sort of a general perspective.

Deborah Avant: And others, and I would put Blackwater and the other category felt like they needed to do whatever they could to further "US interests" and that often was translated into their clients' interests. And so Blackwater was working through this worldwide protected services contract for the State Department. It's client was the State Department was keeping State Department personnel safe, which is definitely an American interest, but it's not the same interests as sort of winning the counterinsurgency. And Blackwater is one of the companies that began to sort of take on this, we are going to do whatever it takes to protect our client. And sometimes that requires playing hardball that requires something perhaps more lethal, something that's more flexible, something that's not paying attention to the sort of unwritten rules that other companies followed. And it was really an interesting time because I think a lot of it was really a debate about what the rules should be about contractors and some people feeling like they were flexible instruments that ought to be able to use the US should use them however they saw fit and others saw them as global professionals that needed to abide by certain kinds of prescriptions. But there weren't really prescriptions that were clear.

Deborah Avant: And so it was really interesting because some CEOs of companies that were more attuned to this global perspective really worried in print, that there was kind of a race to the bottom going on or that the dynamics of the competition between these different views of how contractors should behave would lead to more contractors using violence. And indeed those of us that were following the war had seen that over the course of the period between 2004 and 2007.

Michelle H.: More violence?

Deborah Avant: More violence, more complaints by people in the military that contractors were doing things, they were kind of going off the rails. They were there were all kinds of claims about they were sunglasses and they some of them people allege they were using a lot of steroids. There was evidently quite a lot of access to a variety of different kinds of substances interact. There was a lot of boredom and people spend a lot of time in the gym bulking up and it was just a bit of a tinder box and people began to complain more and more about the behavior of particular contractors. Not all of them, but some of them.

Deborah Avant: And I think what Nisour Square did is it just made it so vivid what the consequences of that could be because in a very short period of time, a lot of people died. And it was just one of those incidents that no matter how much the Iraqi prime minister complaints of things, no matter how much US military complaints of things, it's all just kind of background noise.

Deborah Avant: And then there's this big incident that is captured and made news of and it becomes the thing that we have to worry about with contractors.

Michelle H.: So it kick started a conversation. It may be made people within the industry nervous because that's probably not great for business, but did it kick start any sort of regulatory process?

Deborah Avant: Regulatory process had already kind of begun in the sense that I would argue that even just keeping track of contractors as part of getting your hands around it in a regulatory way. But before Nisour Square there had begun this process led by actually the Swiss government and the ICRC. And that process was already there. But the urgency behind it grew exponentially because of Nisour Square.

Michelle H.: And so just in the timeline of things, when did we see sort of the international code of conduct? When did we see sort of the US put together their commission of wartime contracting?

Deborah Avant: The commission on wartime contractor was actually began before Nisour Square so that was kind of part of that process. We shouldn't just pay attention, we should actually have somebody looking at this all the time. At the same time, you had this kind of international process, which there's a number of governments that are involved in one way or another, vis-à-vis contractors. And one of the interesting things is that governments were involved in a lot of different ways, like the US government where contracting companies were incorporated. And so in that sense it exported these services to other countries, but it also was a country that contracted for these services. And so it was a contracting state. But then there were other countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, which were the territorial states where these contractors operated. So the first thing that happened with this kind of transnational effort was a recognition that the kinds of legal instruments that were important were different for contracting states for exporting stays and porter territorial states.

Deborah Avant: And so the first of the kind of soft law instruments that were signed was called the Montreux document. And it basically lays out the obligations vis-à-vis existing international legal instruments to contracting states, exporting stays in territorial states. And then it also lists a number of best practices that might be associated with those. At the time that the Montreux document was signed, which was 2008.

Deborah Avant: They signed the Montreux document, they actually called for another multi stakeholder process to basically translate international humanitarian law or the laws of war into the appropriate behavior for private security companies. So what should a contractor in a war zone essentially due to behave themselves? And that's a process that led to the international code of conduct. ICOC and that was signed in 2010.

Michelle H.: Essentially aren't still hard and fast rules. These are still sort of like guidelines, is that correct?

Deborah Avant: First of all if you sort of go back to the period in 2004, 2005, 2006 where there's really this debate about how contracts should behave. Should they just be these flexible instruments that go all out for US interests or they should they behave by some kind of global code. Just having this set of rules in place actually kind of salt that conversation and not having debate over what the rules are was actually, I would argue a pretty important step forward. But one of the things that made the step more concrete was when the international code of conduct was signed, it also called for an association to actually kind of govern this international code of conduct and make sure that companies that had signed up to it were doing what they said they should do and in the process of doing that, partly again because of congressional mandate, the Department of Defense began a series of conversations about standards, American National Standards Institute standards and then ISO standards based on that would translate this code of conduct into a standard that could be written into a contract and once you can write a standard into a contract, then that actually gives you some legal mechanism for holding companies accountable.

Deborah Avant: And so that in the jargon we often refer to that as kind of hardening soft law because it attaches harder instruments like losing a contract or losing payment for a contract or losing the capacity to compete for a contract. Those are sanctions that can be wielded against companies that would violate the terms of the international code of conduct.

Michelle H.: That's interesting because when you look at sort of combining business and conflict, I guess the best way to approach that is to look at the contracts and sort of make changes to those contracts.

Deborah Avant: And I think one of the interesting insights was that because these are contractors, there is a lot of access toward regulation by using the contract instrument. And if you look historically when you look back to the [inaudible 00:20:07] that the Italian city states used, I mean a lot of that was via contract and military enterprises that worked for the Holy Roman Empire around the same time.

Deborah Avant: Also, a lot of that was via contract and they're too, to the extent that there was accountability, it was accountability through those contract instruments.

- Michelle H.: So when people say maybe that this industry isn't regulated, it's not really regulated but it doesn't need to be anymore because they figured out a system that sort of governance these companies.
- Deborah Avant: What interesting thing is that more and more of what I would call global regulation actually happens in this space. It's become a much rarer thing for international treaties to be signed between governments where they're going to enforce everything at the domestic level. There are so many industries that are transnational where you have sort of supply chains that are trans national. You have things moving between borders in ways that make it really complicated for any one government to really sort of lay down the law.
- Deborah Avant: And so a lot of the instruments are these tools that allow for coordination but also allow for mechanisms that do in fact regulate them. It's just not regulation the way we've often gotten used to thinking about it. And there are Department of Defense regulations that stipulate that contractors have to be standards compliant to contract for US services in the Department of Defense. There are department of state regulations that say that those that want to compete for the worldwide protective services contract have to be members of the International Code of Conduct Association. And so that's actual regulation to the extent that companies would defy the international code of conduct and be found not to be inappropriate member of the association, they would lose the capacity to compete for those contracts.
- Michelle H.: Bringing this back to Blackwater, because this is why I kind of wanted to combine the conversation of regulation and Blackwater and just in 2018 had the conviction of a Blackwater employee, is there a reason why it's harder to hold contractors accountable for defying International Code of Conduct?
- Deborah Avant: Well Nisour Square of course happened before there was an international code of conduct. And so is always the case. I mean the devils in the details with laws and so the timing is very important here. It's also important that the international code of conduct is really an instrument for punishing companies. It's not an instrument for punishing individuals. The punishment of individuals could be by the territorial state. The Iraqi state for instance, many times when the US negotiates with countries to have its forces be on their territory. It also comes up with a status of forces agreements that preclude prosecution, certainly if it's forces, but often of its contractors too. So because of that there wasn't the capacity to prosecute those contractors in Iraqi courts. One of the complications of prosecuting the Blackwater guards was the fact that they were working for the State Department.
- Deborah Avant: And so the whole idea of is this really military or not? But I think that we saw in the prosecution of the Blackwater personnel and the length of time it took, the mistrials, the gentleman who was convicted that this was his third trial. It's very difficult to use US federal courts in the United States and the standards of evidence in the United States to prosecute a crime that happens so far away. And even just gathering the evidence, witnesses, all of those kinds of things

proved to be incredibly cumbersome. And so even though I would argue that there is regulation and I would push hard against people that say nothing has changed, a lot has changed, but it is nowhere near the level of accountability that we can use for military forces. And so how to hold individuals accountable aside from firing them is something that I think there still a lot of work to be done.

Desmon Farris: And true governmental fashion, we started creating these committees or commissions. So let's take a listen.

Speaker 4: Thank you for attending this hearing, which focuses on the important question. Our private security contractors performing inherently governmental functions.

Desmon Farris: The bipartisan commission was established in 2008 to study the use of government contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan after reports of waste and abuse. Dr. Avant was brought before the commission with a group of other witnesses to discuss their recommendations and concerns.

Dr. Avant: Yes, chairman chairs and distinguished members of the commission on wartime contracting. I want to thank you for asking me to testify this morning. The question of whether private security contractors perform inherently governmental services is both important and hard to answer.

Michelle H.: Back to the commission of wartime contracting. You spoke to this commission when it was established in 2008 what came out of that commission?

Deborah Avant: So the commission on work contracting ended and it ended with a bunch of recommendations. Very few of those recommendations have actually been acted upon. And so I think how the Department of Defense actually is overseeing contractors is not entirely settled. And there are a number of initiatives at different spots to sort of get better handles on this. But at the same time, the office that's probably had the greatest handle on it is basically giving up that handle. So I don't think it's settled the way that the US government is going to keep track of contractors.

Deborah Avant: And that's only Department of Defense. And there are rules for the worldwide protective services, contracted Department of State, but there are not rules for other State Department offices that might hire contractors. There are not rules for other offices in the US government that might be operating abroad that might need security contractors. And so the degree to which this has become a whole of government approach and people understand that there are these rules that they can use and they should use. And there's actually quite a lot of room for additional work to be done on regulating contractors in the US. And that's been one of the things been somewhat disappointing to me. The degree to which of course congress is dealing with many, many things. 2007 wasn't just Nisour Square, it was also the global financial crisis, but there was a good start and it hasn't gone as far as it might have gone.



Deborah Avant: And I think the US government could be a booster to how other governments regulate these contractors as well.

Michelle H.: And I think that also the time of sort of passed when this conversation was?

Deborah Avant: Crises are really important for really training people's attention on an issue and getting them kind of fired up around and making something happen. And it's that is not to say that there won't be additional crises because I think that if there isn't more attention to this kind of thing now if we sort of look at what happened in the past, contractors are likely to be used and they're likely to be used in ways that we don't expect them to be used.

Michelle H.: Now that we know a little bit more of the unique role Blackwater held in the Iraq war, let's talk about its lasting influence and the man behind it, Erik Prince. For that we brought back our friend Sean McFate who was a former army paratrooper and a self-described mercenary. Now he's a professor and the author of his latest book, The New Rules of War. We started by asking him what Blackwater has come to mean to the private contracting world and to the public.

Sean McFate: Blackwater became the hood ornament for the entire industry after 2007. So before that there there's a lot of groups, there was Triple Canopy, there was Dying Core, Blackwater, there was Armor group, Aegis. All sorts of groups out there. But Nisour Square became one of the low points of the war and it's arguably one of the greatest war crimes of the Iraq war. And people sort of could rally around that more than they could around Abu Ghraib or Haditha because these were contractors and contractors, as we all know, we were taught in Hollywood, they're villainous. So they became, it's an easy way to vilify the war without vilifying troops.

Desmon Farris: Yeah. My service got impacted by Abu Ghraib severely. So I could see we as military got pushed that way. But as contractors with this, it became like a beacon for all the attention.

Sean McFate: And there were photographs.

Michelle H.: Why didn't it take Blackwater down? Like why were they still able to partly exist today? Why is Erik Prince still able to sort of work in the industry today?

Sean McFate: It's a good question. I think because the laws of the contract were not necessarily violated. In fact, I believe when it first initially happened, people in the State Department were like thank goodness that Blackwater was there to save our lives. And as the media storm started to mount, that narrative started to be, not to change, but the people rethinking about it. And Blackwater wasn't punished. There was calls to punish at their members of Congress calling the punishment. But ultimately what happened is that their contract could not get renewed. So the invisible hand in the marketplace was the only sort of

recompense up there was. And after that they did what companies do, they rebranded. Right?

Desmon Farris: Right.

Sean McFate: And this is how contracting is different than soldiering. You can't think of the pentagon as our model for private military companies. Better to think about Walmart as Walmart with guns.

Sean McFate: And Walmart's gonna hate me for saying that, but that's a better model. Think about it. So they rebranded a couple times and then there were bought by can styles group and they've been sort of smushed with Triple Canopy a former rival of theirs. And now they've sort of been whitewashed and they've sort of scrubbed the stain of Erik Prince out of it. And Erik Prince has left, he went to Abu Dhabi and he's now in Hong Kong and he has residences all over the place. He's sort of become his own brand.

Michelle H.: Yeah. And if you actually look at the website of the current company that as Blackwater exists, it says Erik Prince is no longer part of the company. They make that very clear.

Sean McFate: Yeah. I mean the stain is hard to wash away. He left the company amid-lawsuits and political hot water yet he's still commands audiences. So there's something to that

Michelle H.: What is Blackwater's role in popular perception of contractors?

Sean McFate: The Blackwater has become the paradigm of villains. So if you're a Hollywood screenwriter or you're whatever novelist, you just looked the Blackwater, that's your model of the villain. And we see this in all sorts of movies, like Jurassic World or they have like mercenaries coming at the end. Is that right?

Michelle H.: Yeah. And they're all dressed like-

Sean McFate: Dressed like Blackwater and shooting innocent dinosaurs for fun. And this is ... Blackwater is fuel for the stereotype. And that's why it lives on. And the fact that Erik Prince is still in the media on Fox & Friends and so forth. I mean, he's also keeping it alive. And writing a book about civilian warriors that has some good parts to it, but it's also, it's a highly mediated version of what happened.

Sean McFate: But Erik Prince command some sort of charisma in this space called negative charisma, called whatever you want, but he is also a beacon for this, for the Blackwater stereotype.

Desmon Farris: It's like anything in business. He got this model and when you're in business, no publicity is publicity, especially when they were effective most of the time doing the job.

Sean McFate: Yeah. I mean Erik Prince has done very well. And that said, not everything he says is wrong. But I think a lot of people in the industry and a lot of people talk to in the industry just wish it wasn't him who was saying the message.

Desmon Farris: All right.

Michelle H.: I think people have even said that to him, we would maybe listen to what you would have to say or consider your proposals if it weren't coming from you.

Sean McFate: Yeah, he's been P&G from the industry by the way. He's-

Desmon Farris: Can you define P&G just so.

Sean McFate: He's been declared persona non grata. So if you're in a country and you're declared persona non grata, you're thrown out of the country. Right. The industry has less love for our Prince than the public does because he gives them a bad name but they have to work up against and so he's not liked anywhere except in China. He's loved in China.

Michelle H.: Where his current company is located?

Sean McFate: His current company, Frontier Services Group, it works for China, which is something doesn't come up with the debates about let's replace American troops in Afghanistan with my mercenaries. We didn't say my mercenaries, but we can assume they're his mercenaries.

Desmon Farris: Right.

Michelle H.: Many people compare Erik Prince with Evan Barlow as an example of how contractors can be done right. I think someone said even Barlow is what Erik Prince wants to be.

Sean McFate: Evan Barlow was the founder of the infamous or famous executive outcomes company in 1990s and in Africa. Evan Barlow is a thinker. Whereas I think Erik Prince is a businessman.

Michelle H.: Then how did executive outcomes approach the situation in Africa differently than Blackwater?

Sean McFate: Well, first of all, EO was a true mercenary corporation with their own air support there. What you think there and they take done countries. All right. I mean, not the United States of America, but there's 190 some countries in the world, only 20 of which have strong militaries. EO was a no kidding powerhouse, like old world private military. Blackwater was just a body guard operation for diplomats in war zones. They did not raise army, they did not have their own special operations. Now they created something called Greystone Group, which are supposed to do this, but they never employed it. There are other mercenaries in

the world who've actually done those things. I've done some of those things. Blackwater, we tend to think of them as a mercenary AFA, but they weren't just ... They were really were body guards with machine guns at the end of the day.

Sean McFate: And frankly Americans do not care what goes on in Africa. I mean there could be 500,000 people got killed in genocide in Darfur, 250,000 and in the Congo. How many hundreds of thousands in west Africa. Americans do not care about dead Africans, almost being blunt about this. But Americans killing Baghdadi's in our Iraq war. That's a different thing entirely.

Michelle H.: Why?

Sean McFate: Because we had ownership in that. EO was a South African company waging war against other corrupt African nations and nobody was like, oh, that's Africa. Africa is a hopeless continent.

Desmon Farris: Versus an army going in de-stabilizing a country by taking this dictator out. And then-

Sean McFate: Right. And also the locals in the ground do not differentiate between soldiers and Blackwater. They all look alike to the local Iraqis.

Michelle H.: with popular culture getting stuck on Blackwater. Is this, so did they US view or are they given undue attention?

Sean McFate: They are and it's actually strategically deceptive because 2007 so yesteryear, I mean the market for forces moved way beyond what listeners in America think it is. It's far more dangerous than people know. And Blackwater looks like Cub Scout to what's going on today.

Desmon Farris: And is less lucrative.

Sean McFate: And, well, it depends who you talk to, but yeah. So mercenaries now they don't fight for money they find for oil wells, right? I mean that's how it happens today. And the world is becoming a washing mercenaries, which will yield more war because mercenaries are incentivized by profit to start in a long gate wars. It's as no longer a question of Blackwater new source squared that chapter is done. We've gone onto a brave new world that is far more scarier.

Michelle H.: And this moment in time that sort of, it was a blip instead of contracting. But it's something that if you talk about contracting today, people will say, oh, like Blackwater. Do you think that ignorance is intentional?

Sean McFate: No, I don't. I think people honestly think of when they think of military contractors they think Blackwater's the biggest bad boy on the block. And it's not, they're not. I do think that the government likes it that way because

contractors are an expedient solution to against circumnavigate civilian control of the military.

Michelle H.: So you still talk with Erik Prince from time to time?

Sean McFate: Yes.

Michelle H.: You called your relationship a friend of me. And so what's your sense of how he's navigating contracting today? You sort of talked about this, but he's evolving with the industry a bit.

Sean McFate: Yeah. I mean, Eric Prince has become largely his own soft creation a villainous creature on the American political landscape, but one that Americans are fascinated with the way they are, the traffic accident on the highway. Does that make sense? So he can convene authority in the media. Not all those ideas are bad. I mean, I think using more contractors in the American War I think is inevitable. How we should do it, this is where I would disagree with Eric and he wants to replace all troops in Afghanistan with 6,500 mercenaries. I don't see how 6,500 anybody's gonna fix that [crosstalk 00:38:33]

Michelle H.: Do you think with that plan, is he thinking more of that executive outcomes sort of?

Sean McFate: Yes. He wants scenarios. But even if you I'm not sure America's ready to outsource a war and I know the generals or not because for them it'd be a concession of failure. So it's politically not viable unless the commander and chief like Donald Trump would say do it. How that would actually occur is another question mark. And I don't think, but I think Eric has got something right, which is contracting is becoming more and more a part of modern warfare. He has some advantage in the fact that he knows how it's done and today, but let's not forget that his current client and chief is Beijing. And one of the problems with mercenary warfare's loyalties and we don't know where his loyalties lie.

Sean McFate: He says he cares deeply about Afghanistan now, but where was he during the Barack Obama years? He was MIA. So I think we have to be very leery about any contractor, not just Eric Prince. When they say I care deeply about such and such people. I think they care deeply and they're passionate about money.

Desmon Farris: Do you think that the reason we think Trump might actually take is because it's a business deal? He knows business. And the fact that you mentioned earlier contracting and the war becoming a business day, that's the push?

Sean McFate: So according to Bob Woodward's book, Fear and according to rumor on the street this plan of Erik Prince was pitched inside the White House being held up by Steve Bannon, the former White House chief strategist. The generals laughed

at of the room, a gentlemen master who was a national security advisor, general Mattis.

Sean McFate: For all sorts of reasons they laughed at either room. Apparently Donald Trump who did not hear the briefing in person knows of this plan because he watches Fox & Friends and that's what Erik Prince clever Prince got a show on Fox & Friends brief this to the president via TV and and Trump asked the national security council, why don't we have mercenaries do this? Why not? And I do believe that if Erik Prince got in the room with Donald Trump, Eric would make a very compelling case for this because he speaks business, he's very charismatic and he's got a background and not everything he says is wrong and everything he says right either. But I think that this plan is not dead and although I personally think it would be a completely catastrophic move it's not one that we can relegate to absurdity.

Michelle H.: Thanks to Deborah Avant and Sean McFate for helping us with this episode and thanks to Stars and Stripes for making this podcast possible.

Desmon Farris: In the next episode, we'll be hearing from the man himself, Eric Prince, and yes, we're devoting the entire episode to an interview with him. Subscribe to the show so you don't miss it.

Speaker 6: This is Force for Hire.